

# *An Examination of the Risks and Benefits of Alternative Education*

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## Abstract

*This literature review examines the risks and benefits for students attending alternative high school education programs. This paper discusses the history and the types of alternative education, who attends, and focuses on the three main themes: the learning environment, the education received, and the perception around the programs. The risks and benefits associated with the main themes are outlined. This review will demonstrate that there is a gap in the literature around the effectiveness of alternative education and further research needs to be done comparing the risks and the benefits, especially by researchers in the field of Child and Youth Care.*

## Keywords

*alternative education, high school, risks, benefits, learning environment, education, perception*

All children and youth have the right to an education, but one size education does not fit for all children and youth. Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “state parties recognize the right of the child to education, and ... on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: encourage the development of different forms of secondary education...” (United Nations, 1991, p.14). Alternative education offers the children and youth who are not functioning well in one type of school, a different option

(Tissington, 2006). Educational researchers have examined alternative education; yet very little has been done from a Child and Youth care perspective. This literature review examines the history of alternative education, who attends, and the different types of alternative education, before critically analyzing the main themes found in the literature. By focusing on the learning environment, the education offered, and the perception of alternative education the review examines the question: Do the benefits of alternative education outweigh the risks

for youth no longer attending mainstream high school?

## Method

Articles were selected because they related directly to alternative education and the main themes of the learning environment, education, and perception. The majority of the literature is from peer reviewed journals, however, commissioned and published reports cited by other authors were also reviewed as primary sources. Literature from 2002-2012 was included and primary research from the previous decade was included when an influential author was

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identified in recent research.

Academic Search Premier was searched within peer reviewed journals using the following terms: 'Alternative education' and 'risks', 'alternative education' and 'benefits'. The reference sections of the articles selected from the foregoing search were examined for frequently cited authors. Following the initial review Academic Search Premier was searched again using the following terms: 'special education' and 'learning styles', 'at-risk student\*' and 'learning styles', 'education' and 'best practice'. Throughout these searches the *not* parameter was used around 'college' and 'elementary school'. All of the literature was critically appraised by ensuring it was relevant to alternative education, that it was accurate, it was peer reviewed, and from a credible journal.

Articles were selected for review based on the following definitions:

**Mainstream education** is traditional schooling in publicly funded secondary schools. The terms mainstream education and traditional programs will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

There is no clear definition of **alternative education** or how it is structured in the literature (Tissington, 2006). The most formal definition is "a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school or falls outside the categories of

regular, special education or vocational education" (Lehr & Lange, 2003, p.59). Students must choose the school (De La Ossa, 2005; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Raywid, 2001; Tissington, 2006), be placed in the school, (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Tissington, 2006) and it must be for no additional cost (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; De La Ossa, 2005). For the purpose of this paper the term alternative education and alternative programs mean the same thing and are used interchangeably.

### **Background**

Alternative education began to emerge in North America in the late 1950s to the early 1960s (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable & Tonelson, 2006; Tissington, 2006; Turton, Umbreit & Mathur, 2011) as a private response to public education. It was used in urban areas as a way to provide an alternative for those failing school, and in suburban areas it was created to reinvent the educational system by using innovative approaches to learning (Quinn et al., 2006).

Alternative education programs gained momentum in the mid-1990s, providing an alternative place to learn for those children and youth not succeeding in mainstream education through voucher programs, magnet schools, and charter schools (Kim & Tatlor, 2008). The programs can be found in a variety of settings including public and private alternative schools, residential treatment

facilities, day facilities, hospitals or clinical schools (Simonsen, Jeffrey-Pearsall & Sugain, 2011). Despite the growth of alternative education, there are some results that show that there are not enough alternative education programs and schools to meet the needs of the students who require them (Aron, 2006).

Those who attend alternative programs vary from those who are considered gifted and talented to those who present with behavioural concerns (Tissington, 2006). Despite this variation, the students who are most often served by alternative education programs are those who are considered at-risk of dropping out of traditional schooling, those who have behavioural or mental health concerns, pregnant or parenting teen students who are considered disruptive or, students with disabilities, or those who are at risk of academic failure (De La Ossa, 2005; Fleming, Dixon & Merry, 2012; Foley & Pang, 2006; Honigsfeeld & Dunn, 2009; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lagana- Riorgan et al., 2011; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Menendez, 2007; Raywid, 1994; Snow, 2009; Tissington, 2006; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). It is also important to note that children who are considered to be in 'care' (i.e. group homes, foster homes, wards of the state) are five times more likely to require special education (Snow, 2009), which could include alternative education programs. The children and

youth that alternative education programs set out to serve are the ones that are considered the most disenfranchised and alienated from mainstream education, who are not benefiting or capable of learning in the way that traditional education offers them (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Students may choose to attend alternative programs to benefit from a learning environment that offers a more therapeutic approach, they may be placed because they have unique behavioural or academic needs, or they may be mandated because of rule violations (Simonsen, Jeffrey-Pearsall & Sugai, 2011).

Alternative programs can be broken down into three distinct categories, coined by Raywid (1994) and expanded by many others throughout the literature. The type of program helps explain who may attend, and what the main focus will be.

#### **Type I: Progressive Innovation**

These programs are created to make school more challenging and fulfilling. They may be called restructured schools and are considered to be progressive education. This type looks more at fixing the system rather than the student and is not only designed for



students who are considered at-risk.

#### **Type II: Last Chance**

The second type is the last chance programs. Students are mandated to go to the program as an alternative to suspension. There is a large focus on behaviour modification and programs are attended by students who are considered to be chronically disruptive. This type is also described as a disciplinary program. There is more of a focus on fixing the student, rather than looking at how the system is not working for the student.

#### **Type III: Remedial Intervention**

The remedial focus type of alternative school emphasizes remediation or rehabilitation, whether that is academic or social/emotional. These are problem-solving schools as they are designed specifically for students who are considered at-risk. There is more of an emphasis on being non-punitive, compassionate, and being more positive.

### **The Risks and Benefits of Alternative Education**

Arguments about the risks and benefits of alternative education are positioned within three main areas.

#### **Learning Environment**

Alternative education programs are often characterized by small class sizes that provide a 'community-like' environment (Smith et al., 2007). This includes the chance to build a stronger relationship with teachers, peers, and the community (Smith et al., 2007). This community-like environment helps offer a positive learning environment for those youth that are considered the most at-risk.

Alternative programs are often located off-site from mainstream high schools, causing the youths attending the programs to feel alienated from the general school population (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

The issue associated with segregation from their peers is one of the major risk factors associated with alternative education programs. The literature examines the importance of the learning environment from both sides, with some authors arguing that alternative programs continue to disenfranchise already vulnerable youth by segregating them from the main stream school

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population, while others argue that the small, caring, community-like environment is beneficial for those students who are not successful in traditional schooling.

It has been argued that alternative programs are segregating the students from those who attend mainstream school (Sagor, 1999). One landmark court case fought in the United States Supreme Court is that of *Brown v. the Board of Educators* in 1954. It was deemed that separate was inherently unequal (Sagor, 1999). It is thought that in order for education to be equal for all, then all students, no matter their race, status, or learning style, should be learning together. The issue with making the education system equal for all is it creates punitive schools, as they are forced to enforce rules and regulations to ensure that all students are treated fairly and equally, without thinking about whether or not all students have or will experience things the same way (Lagana-Riorgan et al., 2011).

Traditional schools function by sorting and classifying children, labelling those who are placed at the bottom as the slow learners or the trouble-makers (Boykin, 2000). It is those students who are often the ones who are removed from the regular classroom and therefore segregated (Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006). The education system itself advocates for inclusive practice, but continues to develop programs that withdraw disenfranchised

or vulnerable students from mainstream education (De Jong & Griffiths, 2006). Bryson (2010) states that this withdrawal further alienates the students who can be considered the most disadvantaged and vulnerable population within the school system. As many of the students who attend alternative programs, especially the ones who are also in care, are already at a high risk for social exclusion (Snow, 2009), it is important to ensure that these students are not placed at further risk by the education system. In a qualitative research project by Lawrence (2011) where interviews were conducted with 11 staff from alternative education programs and 11 staff from mainstream programs, it was found that the isolated nature of alternative programs caused a lack of relationship with peers in the mainstream and a lack of acceptance within social groups. Although the validity of this study can be questioned due to its small sample size, the belief that exclusion from the mainstream population further alienates a population of students needs to be considered as a risk.

The literature also indicates that despite being segregated off campus, the level of inclusion felt by these students is quite high. In a project that investigated students' perceptions about learning, knowing, and school experience, conducted by De La Ossa (2005), it was demonstrated that students felt lost and

isolated within the mainstream system, but were able to communicate better with their peers and staff when they attended an alternative education program. The school experience was not one of isolation when they attended alternative education since there was an open and inclusive environment. The small class sizes of alternative programs allowed for more opportunity to build or rebuild relationships with peers and adults, creating a community like environment (Aron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). When the learning environment in alternative programs promotes a sense of community, the students attending feel included and have a greater school membership. According to the Ministry of Education of Ontario (2010), students achieve their full potential and are more motivated to do well in schools that have a positive school culture, where they feel safe and included. In a district in the United States where only 29% of the students who leave middle school will graduate from high school Poyrazli et al. (2008) reported that the more connected a student felt towards the school and the learning environment, the less school they missed, and the more they wanted to attend school. Although the sample size of this quantitative study was relatively small (102 students), it demonstrated that as the students began to feel connected and included into

the community-like learning environment of the alternative education program, it began to make a difference to how these students (considered 'at-risk' for dropping out) felt about school.

Poyrazli et al., (2008) and De La Ossa (2005) noted that some students felt lost and ignored by staff and teachers when they attended mainstream high school. The large class sizes and the lack of time teachers have for an individual student may hinder the success of students who need more support to be successful in school. As at-risk youth are often reluctant to trust adults, teachers, or mentors, it is important to ensure that these students are in an environment where they feel respected and cared for (Phelan, 2008). Quinn et al. (2006) demonstrated that the positive relationships formed when attending alternative education are among the top reasons students gave for attending. Throughout the literature it can be seen that the small class sizes and an understanding and caring environment helps create opportunities for success in school (De La Ossa, 2005; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lagana et al., 2011; Payrazli et al., 2008), as well as opportunities to build and strengthen relationships with both staff and peers (Aron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006). It was felt that the teachers and staff had more time for the students, were more helpful, and understood that all students have a

unique situation and may learn and relate differently (De La Ossa, 2005; Lagana et al., 2011; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Smith et al., 2007). The strong connection that the youth have with the staff helps the students develop personal boundary skills and become more comfortable asking for help (Phelan, 2008). The emphasis that alternative programs place on building and developing interpersonal relationships helps create a learning environment that is caring and understanding (Raywid, 2001), which often contributes to greater educational success (Payrazli et al., 2008). There is disagreement in the literature, with some authors stating that segregating students hinders their development of interpersonal skills (Bryson, 2010; Sagor, 1999) and places them at risk for falling behind students who are attending mainstream schools.

### **Quality of Education**

Alternative education programs offer exactly what the name says, alternative education options for students who are not successful in mainstream or traditional education settings. Thus one of the main themes discussed throughout the literature is the quality and type of education that is offered in these programs. Education holds value, not just for improved educational outcomes, but also with respect to increasing the quality of life for children, espe-

cially for children in care (Gharabaghi & Groskleg, 2010). Some literature argues that the education being offered in alternative education programs is inferior compared to that of traditional education programs, thus creating a risk for those attending (Aktins, 2008; Heaggans, 2006; Hughes & Adera, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 2001; Sagor, 2006; Te Riele, 2007). Other authors argue that the education being offered in alternative education programs better fits the needs of the students attending the programs due to the individualized and flexible nature of the instruction (Darling & Price, 2004; Honigsfeeld & Dunn, 2009; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Raywid, 2001; Van Bockern & Wenger, 2003; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011).

There is an important discussion throughout the literature around the education that is received while attending alternative education and the worry that it is not of comparable quality to the education received in mainstream schooling. It is thought that alternative programs focus more on behavioural change and place less emphasis on academics (Hughes & Adera, 2006; Raywid, 2001). The isolated nature of some of the programs make it more likely that the difference in quality of education may go unnoticed (Aktins, 2008). Most of these arguments are made by those who are considered experts in



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the field of education or in literature that is based on single program case studies rather than an empirical examination of the program results.

It is said that there is an academic achievement gap between graduates of alternative programs and those in traditional programs (Heaggans, 2006). With the academic emphasis on basic and vocational skills (Allen & Edwards-Kyles, 2007; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011) there is little to no access to advanced course work or university preparation (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Sagor (2006) states that the academic progress of students attending alternative programs is less than what one-year of progress should look like in a traditional school, using standardized tests as a measure. Sagor (2006) names the students 'lifers' as it is believed that the students will never graduate or receive any recognized qualification (Te Riele, 2007). The ability of students to attain credits in a timely manner is also questioned. The average rate of credit attainment lags behind those in traditional programs (Sagor, 2006), though others believe students receive the credit too quickly (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Kim and Taylor (2008) question the integrity of the education received by students in an alternative program that participated in a three month long qualitative study to determine if alternative schools benefited students. It was

observed that students were able to earn credits in two days when they had previously not passed a semester in traditional school (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The educational outcomes are criticized, and whether it is receiving credit too slowly or too quickly or the academic gap, it seems to be a disservice to those attending alternative programs, as students are promised that their academic performance will improve when they attend alternative school.

In today's society the minimum requirement for successful entry into the labor market has become a high school diploma (te Riele, 2007). It is therefore understandable that those who believe that alternative programs do not provide a level of education that meets the current standards think that it is unethical for school staff to encourage students to attend alternative education (Sagor, 1999). Is the education received in these programs really below standards or is it just different from the norm of traditional school? A variety of literature about alternative education programs describes the benefits of the education related to how the programs suit the needs of the students attending. Fitzsimmons (as cited in Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006) listed six core characteristics that distinguish alternative programs from traditional education, with one of those characteristics being that educational programs

offered should be aligned with the students real world experience and it should provide a variety of nontraditional learning options. The students who are attending alternative programs are usually there because traditional education programs are not meeting their needs (Darling & Price, 2004). As the main populations of students who attend alternative programs are those who are considered at-risk, it is important to look at the learning style of that population and match the curriculum and teaching style to that. Students who are considered at-risk may not perform well on standardized tests, may have a difficult time sitting still, concentrating or paying attention, and may process information differently from other students (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2009). As it is considered best practice in the delivery of education for disengaged or at-risk youth to have a learning environment that is not like school (Van Bockern & Wenger, 2003; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011) it makes sense that the format and the evaluation systems are different from that of traditional schools (Raywid, 2001).

The separate and unique educational experience that alternative education offers has value because not all children learn the same (Sagor, 1999). Since these programs navigate outside of the traditional approach, they allow students to find a learning environment that they are the most

successful in (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). **Alternative schools are often characterized by their individual and flexible instructional methods** (Aron, 2006; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Darling & Price, 2004; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Menendez, 2007; Simonsen, Jeffrey-Pearsall & Sugain, 2011; Smith et al., 2007). This includes a more **hands-on, active approach** (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Hughes & Adera, 2006) that better suits the student's needs. The teachers are often **willing to be different than those in traditional schooling, providing the students with alternative ways to grading or assessments, which is considered best practice** (Van Bockern & Wenger, 2003) **and often leads to greater academic outcomes** (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Teachers are more able to **adjust the learning pace** to ensure that the students understand (Kim & Taylor, 2008) and **provide a variety of different and creative instructional methods, including a more comprehensive approach to learning, independent studies, and internships** (Aron, 2006; De La Ossa, 2005) that are individualized to better suit the needs of the student and to ensure greater academic success.

Hughes and Adera (2006) demonstrated that the strategies and practices that work best for the students who

would attend alternative education programs are "curriculum and instruction that are culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate, and have some connections to students' interests and the world they live in" (p.27). **By offering opportunities and a curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to the students' interests** (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Van Bockern & Wenger, 2003; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011) **and takes into account the lived experiences and histories of the students** (Gharabaghi & Groskleg, 2010; Vadeboncoeur, 2009) **there is an increased likelihood that the students will engage more with the learning** (Tissington, 2006).

As alternative education programs are geared towards students who are at risk of dropping out, it can be understood that these students are not engaging with the learning in traditional programs. By providing an instructional method that is engaging increases the chance for greater academic success.

One of the biggest debates in the literature around the education received in alternative education programs surrounds the idea that the **education offered often focuses on vocational and basic skills attainment**. In alternative education the curriculum is designed to meet the needs of a wide variety of individuals who did not experience success in traditional education (Menendez, 2007). Alternative programs often offer a wider range of programs

that focus on the academic aspect of school, but also student-centered life skills and vocational skills (Allen & Edwards-Kyles, 2007; De Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Gharabaghi & Groskleg, 2010). **The work provided is relevant to real world experience and more focused on individualized academic and learning goals** (Aron, 2006; Hughes & Adera, 2006; Simonsen, Jeffrey-Pearsall & Sugain, 2011). **The vocational skills offered provide the students with more relevant and applicable work readiness skills that can be used outside of school in the future, and can successfully aid in getting and keeping employment** (Aron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006) The education received in alternative programs may have a different focus than in a traditional school, but the skills benefit the students in their future. Despite the risk that alternative education may offer inferior education, the number of students served in these programs has increased significantly over the past ten years (Menendez, 2007) and it does not appear to be a question of inferiority, rather it is a question of relevance.

### **Stigma & Self-Esteem**

The final major theme that is evident in the research around alternative education programs surrounds the idea of student's self-perception. The literature either focuses on the risks associated with the negative perceptions of alternative

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programs and the students who attend them or the benefits of the skills and successes gained in alternative programs which leads to an increased and a more positive self-perception.

The students who attend alternative education programs have often already been labeled. They are at-risk, drop-outs, slow learners, or "behavioural" (Boykin, 2000; De La Ossa, 2005; Fleming, Dixon & Merry, 2012; Foley & Pang, 2006; Honigsfeeld & Dunn, 2009; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lagana- Riorgan et al., 2011; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Menendez, 2007; Raywid, 1994; Tissington, 2006 Vadeboncoeur, 2009), the students attending already feel different compared to their peers. The literature argues that by attending alternative programs, the students are further labeled and stigmatized (De Jong & Griffiths, 2006; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Sagor, 1999; Sagor, 2006).

Alternative programs have their own stigmas attached to them, including that they are of poor educational quality and that they are often associated with students who are unsuccessful (Aron, 2006). De Jong and Griffiths (2006), and Kim and Taylor (2008), for example, label alternative programs as a 'dumping ground' for problem youth. In a research synthesis done by Lehr and Lange (2003) alternative programs are viewed as schools for students who have disciplinary problems. De La Ossa (2005) found

that some people had the perception that alternative schools are where people go when they cannot make it in the real world. These negative perceptions around alternative programs can have an impact on the students attending, with a high likelihood that they will be aware of this view and begin to devalue their own education (De Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011). The literature shows that the students attending alternative programs are conceptualized as second class citizens compared to those attending mainstream schooling (De La Ossa, 2005; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Sagor, 1999; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011). Students feel labeled and judged (Lagana- Riorgan, et al., 2011), it may have consequences around their self-esteem (Sagor, 1999), and the fear of not finishing high school may lead them to be more depressed, dissatisfied, or alienated (Prevatt & Kelly, 2003). The perception may have such an impact that some researchers are suggesting that programs be more aware of what language they use to describe their services and even what they call themselves, to avoid the negative connotations that are associated with alternative schools (Prodente, Snader & Weist, 2002)

Alternative programs not only focus on the academics, but also focus on facilitating social, emotional, and behavioural growth (Hughes & Adera,

2006). In a study completed by Dugger and Dugger (1998) that used 71 students who were enrolled in an alternative education program as a focus group and 44 students who were on a wait list to an alternative program but were not yet admitted as a control group, it was found that there is strong research evidence suggesting that there is a relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. This evidence shows the importance of the fact that one of the 11 characteristics of a successful alternative program is self-esteem building (Guerin & Denti, 1999) and that there is a link between alternative education programs and an increased self-esteem. Darling and Price (2004) completed a large qualitative and quantitative study of 900 students who attended one of the 105 alternative programs in Orange County California. Using statistics from the senior exit report and information gathered in focus groups, they found that 92% of the students who attended the programs left with an increased self-esteem. Similar results were noted by Kochhar-Bryant and Lacey (2005), Lehr and Lange (2003); Ministry of Education of Ontario (2010) and Raywid (2001).

The literature not only links an increased self-esteem with attending alternative programs, but also demonstrates an impact on students autonomy (Shankland, Franca, Genolini, Guelfi & Ionescu, 2009), higher



academic performance (Aktins, 2008; Darling & Price, 2004; De La Ossa, 2005), increased positive attitude towards school (Darling & Price, 2004; Raywid, 2001), improved attendance (De La Ossa, 2005), an increased sense of control over things that are controlled externally (e.g. other people's actions, chance, and luck) compared to those in traditional schooling (Miller, Fitch & Marshall, 2003), and the ability to use problem focused coping strategies more often than those in mainstream schooling (Shankland et al., 2009).

Sagor (1999) states that the negative perception of alternative education may affect the students who attend by impacting their ability to interact productively as full members of society, yet according to D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) the goal of alternative education programs is to help the students in being successful, to believe in themselves and believe that they can become contributing members of society. By focusing on the students strengths it provides the students with a message that they are accepted and they belong (Lagana-Riorgan et al., 2011; Poyrazli et al., 2008). This sense of belonging can contribute to improved student outcomes in areas such as academics, behavioural function, and mental health (Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2010). Students attending alternative education programs report feeling proud

of their successes in school (Kim & Taylor, 2008) and describe wanting to make positive changes in their lives (Fleming, Dixon & Merry, 2012). Although society may label and stigmatize the youths attending these programs, the literature appears to demonstrate that students leave alternative education programs with a more positive perception of themselves.

Throughout the literature authors imply that the primary emphasis of the program or the intervention is to prepare the students for successful reintegration into mainstream education (Lawrence, 2011; Poyrazli et al., 2008; Simonsen, Jeffrey-Pearsall & Sugain, 2011). In both Type II and Type III alternative schools the philosophy of the school is to change the student and send them back to mainstream schooling 'fixed'. By placing the blame in the students, the system is adopting a child deficit mindset (Boykin, 2000; De Jong & Griffiths, 2006). The deficit mindset places the blame on a fundamental flaw within the child (Boykin, 2000) rather than attempting to fix the system (Raywid, 2001).

## Discussion

The purpose of this review was to critically analyze the literature to see if the benefits of alternative education outweighed the risks for those students who are no longer attending mainstream high school. Many of the aspects of alternative programs, including

a small caring environment, relationship building, and increased self-esteem, fit within the core characteristics of Child and Youth Care; caring, relationship, and engagement.

There is little consensus about alternative education, with many of the authors discussing both risks and benefits. There are a number of gaps in the literature, with very little research documenting the effectiveness of the program (Aktins, 2008). As there is no clear definition of what alternative education is or who attends, it is difficult to create a research study that provides a definitive answer (Tissington, 2006).

There are a number of limitations associated with this literature review. First off, there is a significant lack of research that has been done on alternative education programs. Although there are many people who advocate about the benefits of alternative education, there is little specific research about the outcomes of alternative schools (Heaggans, 2006). The articles used for this literature review, while peer reviewed, included expert opinions, research to practice, and outlines of programs that work. Those studies that were empirically based had relatively small sample sizes, with only two using a control group. Although they all used random sampling, the populations were from a small group of people who attended alternative education programs and there were few

comparative studies.

The results indicate a number of implications for alternative education programs. If alternative education programs continue to be part of the greater school system, school districts should take a closer look at the risks and benefits of the programs in order to create programs that would better suit the needs of the at-risk population that currently uses them. The research shows that programs that focus more on changing the system tend to have better results, yet many alternative programs have a greater focus on making a change within the child. School districts would benefit from reflective examination of the system itself to consider how it can be shifted to better suit the needs of all students.

Another implication that has been drawn throughout the research on alternative schools is the understanding that at-risk students thrive in small, community type classes but are hindered by segregation. If school districts could create programs that are part of a greater school system rather than segregated, it would help provide the students with the type of supports that they need, without the physical feeling of being separated from the mainstream population. If this was part of the greater system then small, community type classes would no longer be labeled 'different' or 'special', but rather become part of the norm.

The overall consensus

among the literature is there needs to be more research done around alternative education, especially around the effectiveness of the programs. This research should not only be from a school perspective, but also from those in the field of Child and Youth Care. The research shows that those students who attend alternative education programs are more successful in a caring supportive environment with a trusting adult. The role of Child and Youth Counsellors are rarely mentioned in studies on alternative education. Research to determine the overall effectiveness of the programs and the effectiveness of having a Child and Youth Worker in the classroom, compared to those alternative programs without, would examine not only student outcomes but the essential inputs to effective alternative programs.

This literature review examined the risks and benefits of alternative education focusing on the three main themes seen throughout the literature, with the purpose of examining the question of: Do the benefits of alternative education outweigh the risks for youth no longer attending mainstream education? Despite segregation from mainstream high school, alternative education programs often create a 'community like' environment for the students attending. With a focus on relationship building and interpersonal skills, the staff in alternative programs are more

responsive to the needs of at-risk students. There is a greater focus on vocational or basic skill attainment as part of the academics, but while this meets the needs of the students for future employment, it may hinder their academics. Stigma is attached to those attending alternative program, yet students who have left the programs often have an increased self-esteem and report academic success. Finally, alternative programs operate from a child deficit model rather than taking a broader, more systematic look at the traditional education system. Further research needs to be conducted in this area in order to gain a better understanding of alternative education and how it is used to better serve a vulnerable population of children and youth.

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